FREDERICK DOUGLASS WHITE OAK
(Frederick Douglass *Quercus alba*)
NPS Witness Tree Protection Program
Frederick Douglass National Historic Site
1411 W Street, SE
Northeast of front porch
Washington
District of Columbia

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

FREDERICK DOUGLASS WHITE OAK
(Frederick Douglas *Quercus alba*)

HALS No. DC-2

Location:	Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, 1411 W Street, SE, northeast of front porch, Washington, District of Columbia
Owner/Manager:	U.S. Government, National Park Service
Present Use:	Ornamental and shade tree; prominent landscape element
Significance:	The Frederick Douglass White Oak (*Quercus alba*) is significant because of its size, longevity, and association with Frederick Douglas, one of the leading abolitionists of the nineteenth century. It commands a prominent location on the property, witnessed his long hours of work, and is the largest tree remaining from when Frederick Douglass lived at Cedar Hill, where he died on 20 February 1895.
Author & Discipline:	Jonathan Pliska, Landscape Architectural Historian, 2006
Project Information:	The Witness Tree Protection Program was a pilot project undertaken by the Historic American Landscapes Survey and the National Capital Region of the National Park Service. The principals involved were Richard O'Connor, Chief, Heritage Documentation Programs; Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief, Historic American Landscapes Survey; Darwina Neal, Chief, Cultural Resources, National Capital Region; Jonathan Pliska, Historian, Historic American Landscapes Survey; Jet Lowe and James Rosenthal, Photographers, Heritage Documentation Programs.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION[1]

Born an African American slave, Frederick Douglass (1818-95) rose to become a prominent nineteenth century abolitionist, author, editor, orator, social reformer, statesman, and diplomat. Although it was illegal in the antebellum south to teach a slave

[1] Adapted from Frederick Douglass, *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1996); Sandra Thomas *A Biography of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester, n.d.), http://www.history.rochester.edu/class/douglass/home.html (accessed 13 September 2006).

to read or write, one of his owners began teaching Douglass the alphabet when he was about twelve years old. This simple act served to spark Douglass' remarkable rise from slave to leading human rights activist. He recognized that freedom stemmed from knowledge and education, achieving his own literacy through informal lessons from this owner, white children, and later by watching the white men with whom he worked pen letters and other writings. Douglass himself would write four books, all centered on his life as a slave, his first and most famous being his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.* Initially published in 1845, the book quickly became a leading piece of abolitionist literature, selling over 11,000 copies over its first three years alone. Douglass also published a series of abolitionist newspapers, including *The North Star*, and delivered hundreds of moving anti-slavery oratories.

Douglass won his own freedom some thirteen years prior, escaping north to New York in September 1838. Later, he facilitated the escapes of hundreds of more slaves as a major stationmaster on the Underground Railroad. By the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Douglass was one of the best-known and most-accomplished abolitionists in the United States. As a recruiter, he used his growing notoriety and influence to encourage African American men to enlist in the Union Army and take up arms to secure their freedom. Douglass also developed a personal relationship with Abraham Lincoln, and in 1863 conferred with the president over the Army's treatment of black soldiers. Following the war, Douglass emerged as an outspoken advocate for black suffrage and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. He worked closely with the Grant administration to combat the attacks perpetrated by the newly formed Ku Klux Klan.

After the Civil War, Douglass also held several important political positions, including president of the Freedman's National Bank, marshal and recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia, charge d'affaires for the Dominican Republic, and minister-resident and consul-general to the Republic of Haiti. In 1872, he became the first African American to receive a nomination for vice president of the United States, as women's suffragist leader Victoria Woodhull's running mate on the Equal Rights Party's ticket. Although this nomination was made without his knowledge, and Douglass did not campaign, it illustrates the strong bond that Douglass developed with women's suffragists such as Woodhull, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Ida B. Wells. Douglass viewed these women as fighting for the same freedoms that he had sought for African Americans in the previous decades and joined their cause, attending meetings, speaking out, and writing on their behalf. *The North Star's* motto is particularly poignant in this regard, "Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color—God is the Father of us all, and we are all Brethren." Douglass devoted the latter part of his life to campaigning for women's equality and elevating the positions of African Americans, whose rights were increasingly ignored in the post-Reconstruction south.

Douglass centered this work in Washington, D.C., where in 1877 he purchased a large house atop a hill in the Anacostia neighborhood. This property afforded a splendid view of the U.S. Capitol building and the city below, but was located in a segregated community. Douglass' purchase was a clear violation of Washington's racist housing

law, and although white residents repeatedly voiced their displeasure, his ownership was never challenged. He named the house Cedar Hill, and expanded it from fourteen to twenty-one rooms, and the grounds out to fifteen acres. Today Cedar Hill is home to the National Park Service's Frederick Douglass National Historic Site. This house museum and education center has been preserved with 90 percent of Douglass' original furnishings intact, allowing visitors to observe how the great social reformer lived and worked. Books line the study walls, photographs of personal friends and heads of state adorn the walls, and Abrham Lincoln's walking stick, a gift from Marry Todd Lincoln following her husband's death, is proudly displayed.[2]

The natural landscape around the house is likewise significant. Although the cedar trees that once shaded Douglass' home, and inspired its name, are largely gone, a large white oak tree still stands northeast of the front porch. It commands a prominent location on the property and is the largest tree remaining from when Frederick Douglass lived at Cedar Hill. This tree, the Frederick Douglass White Oak, stood over Douglass during his long hours of work and as he welcomed guests to his home. It was also there as he departed each morning and returned each night. He passed it for the last time on the evening of 20 February 1895, when after returning from a meeting of the National Council of Women, he died of a heart attack or stroke. He was seventy-eight years old.

PART II. BIOLOGICAL INFORMATION

Commonly known as white oak, *Quercus alba* is native to North America with a home range stretching from Maine to Florida, and west to Minnesota and Texas.[3] However, its growing zone has extended to cover the contiguous forty-eight states.[4] It is one of approximately 450 diverse species classified under the genus *Quercus* within the oak family Fagaceae.[5] Since many different species share similar features, there is no single characteristic of the white oak that makes it instantly identifiable. However, due to its proliferation across the United States, it comprises the archetypical manifestation of an oak tree. As such, members of the general public easily recognize its leaves, bark, acorns, and overall appearance. The deciduous leaves are arranged on alternate sides of branches and measure approximately 4" to 8 ½" long x 2" to 4" wide. Five to nine oblong lobes branch out from both sides of the central axis, each containing a vein.[6] Leaves are dark green or dark-blue green on their fronts, but pale underneath. In the fall they turn a showy

---

[2] For more information on Cedar Hill and the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, see National Park Service, *Frederick Douglass National Historic Site* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2006), www.nps.gov/frdo (accessed 13 September 2006).
[3] Michael A. Dirr, *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants: Their Identification, Ornamental Characteristics, Culture, Propagation and Uses*, 5th edition (Champaign, Ill.: Stipes Publishing L.L.C., 1998), 815.
[4] Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson, Quercus alba*: White Oak* (Gainsville, Fla.: University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, November 1993), http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ST541 (accessed 12 June 2006).
[5] Liberty Hyde Bailey and Ethyl Hyde Bailey, "*Quercus*," in *Hortus Third: A Concise Dictionary of Plants Cultivated in the United States and Canada*, revised and expanded by the staff of the Liberty Hyde Bailey Hortorium, Cornell University (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), 933.
[6] This branching pattern is known as pinnate venation.

red, sometimes with a purple hew. Bark is an ashy gray and variable in appearance but often ridged, scaled, or otherwise arranged in vertical blocks. Trees exhibit a pyramidal habit when young, but branches spread out with age, forming a more rounded crown. The overall form is often striking, especially during the winter when all branches are clearly visible. Acorns are oblong-ovoid in shape, ¾" to 1" long, deep brown in color, enclosed for one-fourth to one-third its length by a light brown, bumpy, bowl-like cap.[7] Trees typically produce acorns between fifty and 200 years of age, but some reach maturity quicker and begin production by age twenty. Although less noticeable than these other features, flowers begin appearing on mature trees between late March and late May. They take the form of catkins, compact and often droopy forms quite different from the open petal types produced by many other species. White oak is monoecious, meaning both male and female catkins appear on each tree. Male (staminate) catkins appear first. They are yellow and measure 2" to 3" in length. The reddish, female (pistillate) catkins appear five to ten days later on short stalks.[8]

Measuring 100' high, and with a 148' crown spread and 148" trunk circumference, the Frederick Douglass White Oak was, for a time, the largest tree known to exist in Washington, D.C.[9] It is a giant, and actually larger than the national champion white oak in height (86') and crown spread (116').[10] In general, white oaks range from 60' to 100' tall, with spreads of 50' to 90 and trunk circumferences of approximately 120" to 160".[11] They are an extremely slow-growing and long-lived species, averaging 1' of new growth per year or less, and with a life expectancy of greater than 165 years.[12] The Virginia state

---

[7] Dirr, 814.

[8] Robert Rodgers, "Eastern Cottonwood," in *Silvics of North America: 2. Hardwoodss. Agricultural Handbook 654*, online ed., Russell M. Burns and Barbara H. Honkala, tech. coords. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, 1990),1185, http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/silvics_manual/volume_2/silvics_v2.pdf (accessed 13 June 2006).

[9] Carrie Donovan, "Searching the City for Its Biggest Inhabitants," *Washington Post*, 4 May 2006; Carrie Donovan, "One White Oak Topples Another as Tallest Tree in District," *Washington Post*, 9 November 2006. A tree's size is determined by the number of tree points earned by that tree. Tree points are calculated using the following equation developed by the nonprofit conservation organization American Forests, which maintains the National Register of Big Trees: Tree points = circumference (inches) + tree height (feet) + ¼ crown spread (feet). Measurements of Washington, D.C., trees were conducted by the Casey Trees Endowment Fund. For more information, see American Forests, "National Register of Big Trees," *American Forests* (Washington, D.C.: American Forests, 2006), http://www.americanforests.org/resources/bigtrees (accessed 7 September 2006); Casey Trees Endowment Fund, *Casey Trees Endowment Fund* (Washington, D.C.: Casey Trees Endowment Fund, 2006), http://www.caseytrees.org (accessed 13 November 2006).

[10] The national champion is the largest tree of a given species known to exist in the United States. For information on the national champion white oak, see American Forests, "White Oak, *Quercus alba*," *National Register of Big Trees*, (Washington, D.C.: American Forests, 2006), http://www.americanforests.org/resources/bigtrees/register.php?details=549 (accessed 23 June 2006).

[11] Gilman and Watson; Lincoln Moore, "Plant Fact Sheet: White Oak, *Quercus, phellos*," in *PLANTS Database* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, National Plant Data Center, 5 February 2002), http://plants.nrcs.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_qual.pdf (accessed 23 June 2006).

[12] Dirr 814; Jeffery L. Reimer and Walter Mark. "*Quercus alba*," in *SelecTree: A Tree Selection Guide* (San Luis Obispo, Calif.:Urban Forest Ecosystems Institute, 2004), California Polytechnic State University, http://selectree.calpoly.edu (accessed 21 June 2006).

champion is said to be over 500 years of age.[13] The Frederick Douglass White Oak was already large and well established when the abolitionist lived at Cedar Hill (1877-96), and Douglass included descriptions of the tree in his diary entries. Given the species' slow growth rate, it is reasonable to believe that the tree may have taken root as early as the turn of the nineteenth century, giving an approximate age of 200 years. Though two centuries is long enough to be considered chronologically old for a white oak, with care this tree may well live one for an additional 200 years or more. As of June 2006, it showed no weakness, deterioration, structural unsoundness, or other signs of failing health

Quercus alba is an extremely vigorous species that exhibits no serious susceptibility to pests or diseases, and is suited to a variety of environmental conditions. The trees grow best in mildly acidic soils and accept clay, sand, or loamy earth that is left occasionally wet or routinely well-drained. They are moderately drought tolerant, but highly resistant to the damaging effects brought on by elevated ozone levels or the presence of aerosol salts, frequently used to melt ice and aid drivers in the winter months. These factors make them desirable urban trees, and they grow well in lawns, parking lot islands, and highway medians. However, careful planning should be exercised due to their large size, and roots will lift sidewalks and curbing if planted in areas less than 8' wide.[14] Given these factors, the Frederick Douglass White Oak is planted in an ideal location. The soil is loamy and acidic, and the tree is far enough from the house that its roots do not impact the foundation.

---

[13] The state champion tree is the largest tree of a given species known to exist in a particular state. For information on the Virginia state champion white oak, see Robert Stempel, "Tree Detail for *Quercus alba* Located at N 36-52-33.7 W 77-44-30.7," in *Virginia Big Tree Database*, Andrew Meeks, ed. (Blacksburg, Va.: Virginia Polytechnic and State University, 2006), http://www.cnr.vt.edu/4h/bigtree/bigtree_detail.cfm?AutofieldforPrimaryKey=197, Virginia Polytechnic and State University, Dept. of Forestry (accessed 23 June 2006).

[14] Gilman and Watson.